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Tindall: Tribes Should Be Partners in Homeland Security

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Tindall: Tribes Should Be Partners in Homeland Security

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Tribal governments play a critical, though perhaps underappreciated, role in the nation's homeland security equation.

And aside from adequate resources and funding, what tribes really desire is a place at the table as sovereign entities as provided in the Constitution – a distinction that should avoid the need of tribes to appeal to states or local governments for funding, but too often doesn't.

That was the over-riding message to master's degree students during a December lecture at the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) by alumnus James Tindall.

"We're not a local government; we're a sovereign nation," Tindall said.

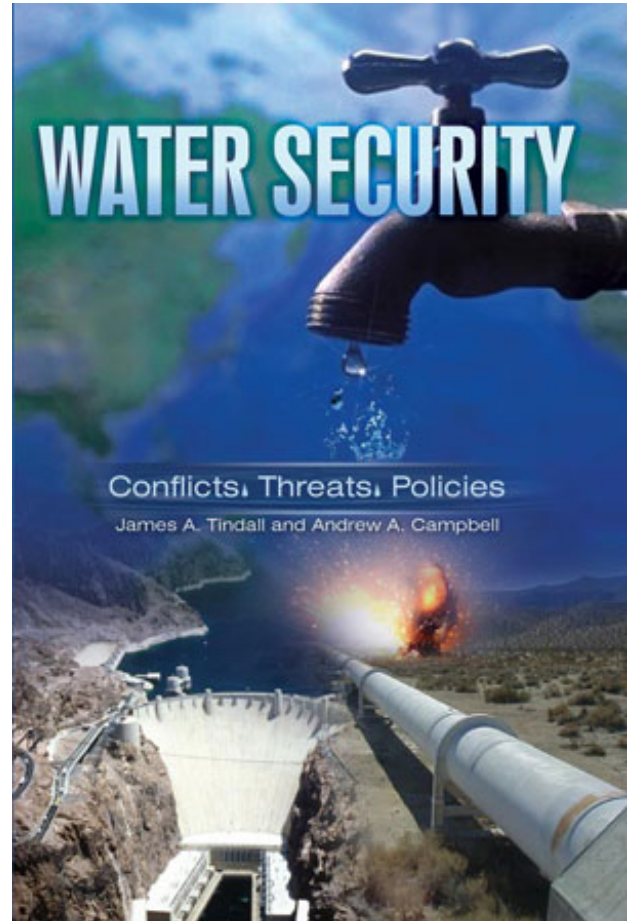
Tindall, who is of Native American (Cherokee/Seminole) and Alaskan ethnicity, and grew up on a reservation in Florida, delivered the lecture to a group of students in cohort 0905/0906 as part of an Introduction to Homeland Security course.

The numbers Tindall discussed point to the importance of tribal governments' homeland security role. Among the examples he cited: Twenty-five of these sovereign governments have jurisdiction over 260 miles of border with Mexico and Canada (that's 100 miles longer than California's border with Mexico); the Tohono O'Odham Reservation on the Arizona-Mexico border is a "drug and illegal immigration battleground" that the tribe there has to combat with scant funding; and, reservations often contain critical infrastructure, or key resources, that must be protected by 171 tribal law enforcement agencies across the United States – such as the Grand Coulee Dam that is situated on the Columbia River. Moreover, Native Americans are typically the first responders during times of emergencies in these areas and usually comprise the closest police force.

Despite having jurisdiction over some homeland security hotspots, tribes often find themselves under-funded and under-trained to meet the demands they face. Although the Constitution distinguishes Native American tribes as sovereign, that distinction is not always the reality in practice and, in some cases, legislation, Tindall said. Case in point: Tribes are often seen as local governments or subdivisions of the states when it comes to actually doling out homeland security moneys.

"The states get hundreds of millions of dollars in homeland security grants, but very little of that filters down to the tribes," Tindall said. "They (tribes) don't always get some of the training they would like to have."

Tindall offered suggestions on how to better prepare tribes to engage in homeland security. For starters, Native American tribes should be allowed to compete directly for Department of Homeland Security grants and their portion of state grants should be increased, he said. Also, tribal presidents should be empowered to declare states of emergency to free federal funding for recovery, just as governors of states are able to do.



" It's really important to them to be part of the process," Tindall said. " The tribes have not normally been included in the discussion on homeland security."

Tindall's presentation stemmed from requests by students who wanted to learn more about homeland security issues facing tribal governments, said faculty member Ellen Gordon. That fluidity in adapting course content as needed is an ability that makes CHDS' educational offerings unique.

" Being able to be flexible in our programs to bring in outside experts is one of the most important things we can do," Gordon said.

And, having CHDS alum available, such as Tindall, capitalizes on the bank of expertise routinely utilized in master's degree courses as well as the Center's Executive Leaders Program (ELP) as graduates frequently return to share real-world insight with current students.

" Whether it's the master's program or ELP, we have built a strong network of experts," Gordon said.

Tindall is a 2006 CHDS graduate and is Program Director (Manmade, Natural, and Technological Hazards Security) with the U.S. Department of the Interior whose research interests span many disciplines. He is co-author of a book titled "Water Security: Threats, Conflicts, Policies," which is expected to be released in 2010 after being pushed back from a fall release date. He has also participated in the Middle East peace process and has studies the interdependencies among water, energy, food, public policy and critical infrastructures.

Perhaps fittingly, his Indian name, given to him by a medicine man, is Ga-lu-na-di A-danh-te-ha-e-sv, or Sky Thinker.

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